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Patron Deities of the Hunt and Wild Animals in Dagestan

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Abstract

The paper discusses the characteristic features and spheres of activities of the patron deities of the hunt, masters of the animals and protectors of game and wildlife in the folk beliefs of the Dagestani highlanders—different groups of Avars, Laks, Lezgins, Dargins, Tabasaranis, Tsakhurs, Rutuls, and Kumyks. Some of these deities are ambivalent figures equally standing as harmful demons, who steal the foetus of righteous women, new-born babies or cows.

Keywords

Deities of the Hunt, Patrons of Wild Animals, Dagestani Demons, Folk Beliefs in Dagestan

The patron deities of hunting are the most archaic imaginary figures since the times when nature was an essential part of cult. Their worship occupied an important place in the religious beliefs and spiritual culture of the peoples of Dagestan, which is manifested, for example, in the names of mummers (most often called “goat”, “bear”, or “wolf”), their zoomorphic masks and costume, as well as in imitative and pantomime performances in different calendar, agricultural, public and family (domestic) rituals, the latter being approached as totemic folk festivals—ceremonies of multiplying animals and hunting dances, where the mask is an image of the mythological creature, totemic ancestor, patron of hunting, and the fur-bearing animal (Seferbekov 2009a: 229-230; idem 2010).

Sometimes these deities were endowed with the functions and traits of demonic characters, and, on the contrary, the demons had featured as patrons of the animals and hunt. Generally, the peoples of the Avar-Ando-Didoi ethno-linguistic group have preserved the belief in the Islamised deities of the mountains, wildlife and hunt—the *Budalaals* (*Budulaals*) (Aglarov 1984: 36-42). Gidatli Avars think that the *Budalaals* are the masters of the wild animals, mainly deer and wild goats. The hunter can kill only those animals whose meat had been already eaten,

without damaging the bones, by other hunters and then revived by the *Budalaals*. After killing and cutting a wild goat, a hunter should by no means break its bones. They needed to be left intact, so the mountain spirits could later revive the animal. Hunters killing game beyond measure are punished by the *Budalaals*, who drop them into abyss or send avalanches and rockfalls upon them.

It was also believed that the *Budalaals* would steal the fruit of the womb of pious women, or new-born babies, leaving drops of blood or the child's footprint on a window sill or at the threshold. Stolen children were transmuted by the *Budalaals* into their like (Seferbekov 2004: 72-73). The Khunzakh Avars (Seferbekov / Šigabudinov 2006: 108-109) and the Andalal Avars (Aligadžieva / Seferbekov 2004: 108-109) believe that the foetus was stolen by the demon *Xudučl* (*Gudučl*). After stealing it, *Xudučl* left one or a few drops of blood on the sill or threshold, or a drop of blood on the woman's nightgown. They say that *Xudučl* also steal the foetus of cows, leaving a few drops of blood at the crib's threshold. Stolen children are taken away to the top of the *K̄ili-megler* ("Saddle-mountain"), near Gunib, or to the *Glabdalzazul-megler* ("Mountain of the blessed") in Botlikh, where they become the *Budalaals*. Near the "Saddle-Mountain" or the "Mountain of the Blessed" some people are said to have seen traces of wet barefoot children on the rocks and heard voices reciting prayers from the Qur'an. During the rainmaking ceremony the inhabitants of Andalal slaughtered a black sheep and were cooking the meat until it would be separated from the bones, and the bones, without breaking them, were buried in the ground "for the hungry *Budalaals*". The inhabitants of the village of Sogratl believe that the *Budalaals* live on a mountain in the area of *Budalagizabazul ruk̄* ("the Residence of the *Budalaals*"). In the same village there is a legend about a saint named *Budal-Glaxlmad*, who lived atop of the highest mountain of Andalal. He allegedly could bring a bouquet of flowers in winter. This saint was the patron of the animals, and hunters were seeking his permission for hunting game.

The Karatin Avars believed that wildlife was patronised by the mountain spirits *Budali* (*Budaldi*), who lived on top of the mountains and in caves. They are visible only to the righteous persons. Their favourite animals are wild goats, and the *Budalis* take care of them, feeding them with salt, milking them and making cheese of their milk. The *Budalis* punish hunters who kill too much of the game. However, they help those who meet a disaster or get into trouble. When shepherds graze sheep in dangerous places (on steep slopes, the precipice), they call in the help of the *Budali*. It is a common belief that the mountain spirits

steal the fruit of the womb during pregnancy (or steal babies at birth) of some sinless and virtuous women. Having stolen the foetus, they leave their tracks as drops of blood on the window sill or threshold. The stolen child later allegedly turns into a *Budali* (Seferbekov/Seferbekov 2009: 57).

The patrons of wildlife, according to the Akhvakh Avars, were the *Budalaals*. They lived on the Tarkho mountain near the Bogos Ridge. According to the stories of people endowed with the gift to see the *Budalaals*, they resemble humans and breed wild goats. When someone of the *Budalaals* dies, they steal the fruit of the womb of the earthly pious women and subsequently transform it into a *Budalaal*. Stealing the fruit, the *Budalaals* leave the child's footprint on the window sill, and it is only his mother that could see these traces. She would then go to heaven after her death. Since patrons of wildlife, the *Budalaals*, do not like that people hunt, they take revenge if hunters kill too much game. A legend says that a hunter named Osman from the Lologonitl̥ village heard how the *Budalaals* shouted: "Leave our animals alone!". They say also that another hunter, Arab, from the same village, killed a female goat when a woman *Budalaal*, invisible to the hunter, was milking it. The latter cursed Arab, wishing him to have not more than one son, and the curse was fulfilled: even today all the descendants of the hunter have only one son. Hunters, when eating the meat of the killed game, do not break its bones, since there is a belief that the *Budalaals* collect the bones, throw them into the skin and give the animal a new life. Missing bones are replaced with branches. The *Budalaals* patronise both wild and, in several contents, domestic animals. Shepherds say that when the flock is moved to mountain pastures, it can be seen how female and male sheep are grazing separately: "The *Budalaals* separate them so that lambs are born in time closer to spring" (Seferbekov 2008: 140-141).

Apart from the belief in the *Budalaals*, the masters of the mountains and wildlife, the Akhvakh Avars also worshipped the "Masters of Forests" *Tlatlax̣a* (*Tlatlax̣e*) that were imagined in the shapes of wild animals—bear, wolf, ox, deer, wild boar, etc. When walking into the woods, one should read a prayer, otherwise the "forest masters" might scare people to death, drive them mad, or get them into the thicket away from home, etc. In order not to disturb the "masters", people did not talk loudly, nor do they laugh, fight and swear in the forest (Luguev 2008: 318).

The belief in the "masters of forest" was common among the Dargins as well. The Dargin-Kaytaghs of the village of Gulli knew this mythological character as *Vagbigg*. It had the form of a terrible and insidious

old woman with long gray hair. She lived in the forest, in a cave or under a heap of large rock boulders. *Vagbigg* could be caught in the evening by the river, sharpening her teeth. Her name was used to frighten children to ensure that they would not go into the woods. They say *Vagbigg* had a little daughter, *Nik̄yatli* (lit. "Little bald, baldy"). Pregnant women were afraid of *Vagbigg* because they believed the demon could steal the fruit of the womb of the mother.

The Kaytaghs of the village of Chumli call the witch living in the woods and rocks *Iney-aba*. She is slim, tall and ugly. She has large pendulous breasts, one of which being thrown over her shoulder. She carries her daughter *Nik̄yatli*, holding her under her arms. Disobedient children were frightened at nights and told that *Iney-aba* would come and take them. The demoness was said to steal a seven-month foetus from the mother's womb: if the stolen foetus was a boy, drops of blood appeared on the knife or dagger of the pregnant woman's husband, and if it was a girl such drops were found on the woman's scissors.

Some similarity with the described characters can be traced in the popular perceptions about *Mamax̄us* (lit. "(woman with) trailing breasts"), which could be found in the beliefs of the Kaytagh village of Khadaga. According to them, the witch lived not far from the village, in the area of Хьукьла in a forest cave. As if to justify her name, she had large breasts, which she would drag on her shoulders. The *Mamax̄us* roamed around the outskirts of the village and offered children to suck her breasts, saying: "I will give you your mother's breast". They say she was walking around the woods, offering her breast to strayed children. Those who agreed to suck her breast, were dying soon. According to the accounts of people from another Kaytagh village, Karatsan, the *Mamax̄us* offered to suck her breasts not only to children but also to adults. Near the cave where she lived, there were rocks in which she allegedly milked deer. Since the road passes near her home, they say, she prevented the people from passing there, offering her breast to the traveller and cursing those who refused. One of the hunters unable to bear the curses shot her and wounded fatally. Before dying, the *Mamax̄us* cursed the hunter and foretold his death in three days (Seferbekov / Magomedov 2010: 283-285).

The belief in the gods of the hunt, mountains and wildlife can be observed in the popular religious concepts of the Laks as well. Their patron of the animals and hunt, *Avdal* (Xalilov 1984: 78-79), is depicted as an old man with a white beard. He pastures wild goats in the mountains and protects them from being exterminated by the hunters. Later, under the influence of Islam, *Avdal* turns into the pious *Avdal-Vali*, *Vali-*

Avdullah, or *Sultan-Suleiman* (Xalidova 1982: 27-28, 36). Among the Laks of the villages of Tsovkra, Khosrekh, and Vachi there was a common belief in the reincarnation of the souls of *Jamaat* (rural communities) elders into wild goats and deer (Bulatov / Luguev 2004: 63).

The Lezgi mythology, apparently under the influence of Islam, has preserved no beliefs about deities of the hunt and wild animals. Among the characters of the so called low mythology the most popular was *Al-pab*, the demon-antagonist of childbirth (Mamedov 1892: 145-146). It was represented in the guise of an old and tall woman with loose long, thick, gray and reddish hair reaching her heels and fingers with claws. She would appear to the people naked or dressed in rags. She lived in isolated places in the mountains, in caves, and in the winter, near the river. The main function of *Al-pab* was the kidnapping of new mothers' entrails. Despite the fact that *Al-pab* was the enemy of childbirth, surprisingly, it was also the "mistress of the animals" and supposedly understood the language of animals. It punished hunters who hunted for pregnant females of wild animals. The wild goats (sacred animals of the Lezgins) enjoyed her special protection, she allegedly ate their placenta (Seferbekov 2009: 47).¹

No images of pagan hunting deities and protectors of wildlife occur now in the Tabasaran mythology. It is most possible that in the period of the domination of Islam they have gradually passed into oblivion. Some attributes of the master of the animals and birds, who knew their language, were ascribed to the Muslim prophet Suleiman, *Suleyman pey-gambar* (idem 2000: 11).

Abdal was the patron of the animals among the Tsakhurs. According to A. Dirr, he "took care of wild animals, herded and milked them; he would sometimes appear to the hunters as a white beast or a white man, but it always predicted a misfortune. Yet, the name *Abdal* itself denotes a godly person, the one denying the worldly pleasures for the sake of God, which allows us to assume that *Abdal* is nothing but a distorted form of 'Abdallāh—"servant of God". *Abdal*, the patron of game, however, gives the hunters only what he intended for the *zakāt*, that is the share of the poor" (Dirr 1915: 7).

The patron of the hunt and animals among the Rutuls was the "clairvoyant" *Sifi-Khawalyj*. She feeds animals with salt, milks and protects them from destruction. She has a sparkling white body and long hair (Xalidova 1982: 36).

¹ More likely, *Al-pab* is another reflex of the Near Eastern *Al*, recorded in the folk traditions of many peoples of the region (for details, see Asatrian 2001; Arakelova 2003).

Mythological characters associated with the forest, wildlife and hunt were also found in the beliefs of the Turkic peoples of Dagestan. Thus, the Kumyks had popular characters of the hunters' legends about the master or the goddess of the forest, *Orman-essi*; the god of the forest, *Avamčy*; "forest people", the single-eyed *Kəyilyčteš* ("sabre chest"); *Balta-teš* ("axe chest"), *Albasly* and her husband, *Agač-Angly*, etc. (Xalipaeva 1994: 36-45, 68, 116, 126-127, 129, 130-133).

Thus, the patron-deities of the hunt and wildlife among the peoples of Dagestan should be generally characterised with their ambivalence, combination of divine, benign qualities with demonic, evil traits, which primarily point to their chthonic nature and their connection with the uncontrolled forces of environment, particularly the earth (see Asatryan 2002).

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